

Introduction to Literary Theory
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture – 10
New Criticism

Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on Literary Theory. Today, we are going to start our discussion on the on a school of literary criticism that is usually identified within the field of English studies as Anglo American New Criticism or simply as New Criticism. It is a way of approaching and understanding literature that held sway in the field of English studies both in the universities of Britain and of America, roughly during the second and the third quarters of the 20th century.

So, we are basically moving forward by about a 100 years or so, from the romantic literary theory which we discussed in our previous two lectures. Now, I think that by now you have already been able to notice a trend that is emerging in this series of lectures. So, whenever we take up any new literary theory for discussion we see that its emergence is strongly tied up with some kind of socio-political change or even turmoil. And, this goes on to show actually how integrally the politics and revolutionary social movements are tied to changes in the cultural world.

So, in my introductory lecture for instance I have already discussed how what is today often labeled as literary theory or even simply as theory was an intellectual product of the political turmoil of the 1960s, when students and workers gathered in the streets of a Paris to protest against authoritarianism. But, as I have also explained earlier the 1960s do important is not a one of moment rather in the history when socio-political revolution has led to the emergence of new cultural theories about how to create and how to read literature.

Indeed, as we have seen in our previous lectures the very emergence of English literature as a subject of systematic study and indeed also as a subject of systematic criticism was connected with it is own history of socio-political upheavals. This for instance was the history of the decline of the power of monarchy and aristocracy in England and the emergence of a new bourgeois public sphere during the 18th century.

Similarly, while discussing the emergence of romantic literary theory, we have seen how the ideals of French revolution have shaped it. In today's discussion of New Criticism we will see how a political epicenter of this new intellectual movement might be located in the outbreak of the First World War and as you all know that this war started in 1914 and continued till 1918 and it resulted in a manslaughter that was unprecedented in human history and, this was really a world that was at war.

So, even though the immediate incident that triggered the war was a rather localized issue of European politics which was the killing of the crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian empire named Franz Ferdinand. It soon grew to involve not only the whole of Europe, but also America for instance, Russia a triggered Bolshevik revolution there and also a large part of Asia and Africa, primarily because these places were European colonies.

So, just to give you a perspective a war that began with the murder of an Austrian prince ended up killing more than 1 crore or 10 million soldiers worldwide out of whom 70000 were Indian soldiers. So, amidst this widespread killing and destruction there was a pervasive sense of losing one's grip on the world as it was known till then and of course, this sense of alienation and this sense of loss was the sharpest in Europe which was at the epicenter of the whole political turmoil.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:19)

Walter Benjamin
(1892 - 1940)



Source: WorldCat Identities

So, the German intellectual Walter Benjamin writes very eloquently about this feeling in his essay titled the storyteller where Benjamin observes that it was noticeable how after the first world war and I quote from Benjamin.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:40)

“[M]en returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience?”

(“The Storyteller”, Walter Benjamin)

“Men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experiences?” Benjamin argues that this was because of all their past experiences that allowed these people to communicate with the world around them and to understand how things function within that world was destroyed by the First World War.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:16)

“For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.”

And, I quote from Benjamin again for never has experienced being contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare; again something that was employed during the First World War, economic experience by inflation, so, there was runaway inflation during the first world war, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, morale experienced by those in power. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged, but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

New Criticism in many ways is the literary product is a sort of literary theoretical product of this fragile human being who has been shown of all certainties of the world that he knew of by the destructive torrents and explosions of the First World War. Hence, it is a literary theory that sways between two desires, between the desire to rediscover for oneself the lost sense of tradition through literature and literary appreciation, this is one of the pools of that desire and the other pool is the effort to read literature without the help of any context, without the help of any socio-cultural tradition.

Because, all of these have been made meaningless by the experiences of the First World War and I think the first pool is best represented by the theoretical works of T. S. Eliot. And, the other pool is best represented by the school of practical criticism initiated by I. A. Richards and during the course of today's lecture we will explore both these pools, but we will start with T. S. Eliot.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:42)

T. S. Eliot
(1888 – 1965)

- “Tradition and Individual Talent”



Source: Poetry Foundation

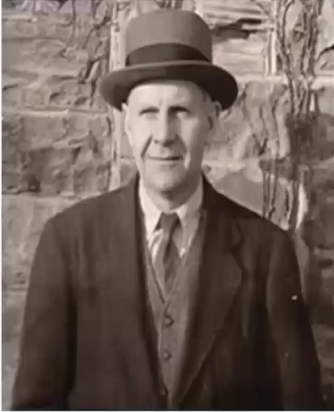
Now, T. S. Eliot is too famous a figure within the field of English literary studies to need any introduction and in any case we will have to return to the works of T. S. Eliot as a poet when we engage theories of modernism in one of our future lectures. So, for now I will just mention his dates which are 1888 to 1965 and I will also like to mention the fact that Eliot was born in America, but spent the most part of his adult life in England, which was in contrast to the other major theorist of a New Criticism I. E. Richards who was born in England, but then went on to teach at the Harvard university in America.

So, this explains why New Criticism is also regarded as an Anglo American critical tradition because this theory really spans the two sides of the Atlantic in more than one ways.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:58)

John Crowe Ransom
(1888 - 1974)

- *The New Criticism* (1941)



Source: WorldCat Identities

And, since we are talking about nomenclatures let me also note here that the term New Criticism was derived from the 1941 book titled the New Criticism written by the American scholar John Crowe Ransom who used this name to bring under a common umbrella the critical thoughts of intellectuals like Elliot, Richards and others.

So, the name New Criticism actually came much later and only after the critical positions of a people like Eliot and Richards had become main stream within the Anglo American academia; so, coming back to Eliot again. The piece of theoretical work that I want to focus in this lecture today is an essay titled Tradition and Individual Talent. It was published in 1919 which means it was almost immediately published after the end of the First World War and it contains basically two interrelated sections followed by a very brief conclusion.

The first of these sections revolves around the idea of tradition and at the heart of how Eliot defines tradition is the notion of what he calls historic sense and I quote from the essay.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:15)

“[T]he historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”.

(“Tradition and Individual Talent”, T.S. Eliot)

Eliot says, “The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”. In other words tradition which is posited on the historical sense is a constant folding in of the present into a temporal continuum and thereby a fitting in of the present within the template of the past.

And it is important to note here that this constant fitting in of the present within the past is a dynamic process. So, the present and the new become meaningful only when inscribed onto the template of the past, but in being so, inscribed it also simultaneously changes what the past is, thereby also modifying the sense of tradition. Now, all of this might sound rather complex and vague. So, let me try and produce a concrete example of how tradition connects the present with the past.

So, let us say I write a poem of fourteen lines today praising the beauty and intelligence of my pet cat. Now, this poem written in the present we will not make much sense from the view of literary criticism and literary appreciation until and unless we have what Eliot calls the historical sense and until and unless we connect the poem on my cat with the poetic tradition of sonnet writing which uses the fourteen line form.

And it is only when the present poem is in folded within the sonnet tradition that we will be able to see how the cat in my poem plays the same role as a beloved named Beatrice Che in the sonnets written by the medieval Italian poet Dante. Indeed this comparison is important for my cat poem work at all as a piece of literary creation.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:29)

“No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”

(“Tradition and Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot)

Therefore, Eliot argues and I quote, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”

Now, it is also important to note here that the influence of the past tradition on the present poetry all work of art is not unidirectional, but rather it works both ways. So, in other words my cat poem does gain in meaning by being folded within the sonnet tradition, but it also simultaneously changes the sonnet tradition. That is to say if any of you try your hand at writing a sonnet tomorrow you will now have to engage with a tradition that is constituted not only of the sonnets written on the beloved by Dante, but also my cat sonnet.

So, my poem of fourteen lines written in the present is subsumed within the existing tradition even while altering the contours of that tradition for the future generation of poets like you. But, having established the fact that a historical sense of the tradition is significant for any poet or any creative artist in general to produce a work of art, we are confronted with a very important question and the question is: how does the individual artist relate to tradition.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:47)

- An individual artist can only engage with tradition at the expenditure of tremendous labour.
- An artist can properly engage with tradition only through a process of “continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”

Now, Eliot makes two very important points here. The first point that he makes is that, an individual artist can only engage with tradition at the expenditure of tremendous amount of labor. It cannot be simply inherited; tradition cannot be simply inherited by someone by just being born within a particular socio-cultural milieu. The second point that Eliot makes is that an artist can only properly engage with tradition through a process of and I quote “continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”.

Now, the first of these two points is easily understood if an order to write a sonnet you would need to know not only about sonnets written by the medieval Italian poet Dante or the 16th century English poet William Shakespeare, but also an obscure cat sonnet written by me, then this would require tremendous amount of labor and as Eliot rightly points out a ridiculous amount of erudition. So, that is something that you require in order to engage with tradition.

And, that this sense of tradition cannot just be passively inherited is also easily understandable, especially if we put this statement within the context of the years immediately following the First World War. Since, the experience of the war had so radically severed the connection of an individual with the familiar past. A sense of tradition could only be gained through a painstaking reconstruction of this past in order to make it usable again.

But, the problem is actually with the second point that Eliot makes. What does it mean to sacrifice one's personality in order to creatively engage with tradition. This is the question that Eliot answers in the second half of his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:37)

“[T]he poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium”.

(“Tradition and Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot)

And, to understand his answer we should start with Eliot's assertion that and I quote, “The poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium”. Now, if we go back to our lectures on Aristotle's *Poetics* we will see that one of the things that Aristotle keeps stressing is that poetry is essentially a craft which uses mediums like rhythm, language and harmony to express itself. Even like a carpenter who uses mediums like wood, chisel and lead machine to create his almira and beds and things like that and the point that Eliot makes in his essay is similar to this point made by Aristotle.

In Eliot's understanding of poetry is that of a craft which uses phrases and images to construct itself. So, what the poet creates is a combination of these phrases, images and even feelings which are not exclusively his own, but already available to him and also to others in the form of tradition. So, for instance in writing my cat sonnet, I will not only be recycling the poetic form of the sonnet and some of the phrases available to me through the sonnet tradition but, also the feeling of awe and reverence that is to be directed towards the subject of my poem.

And, in this combination nothing actually needs to come from my personality, not even the feelings that I put in my poem, because it is not necessary to personally feel any

sense of awe or reverence or even great love towards my cat or towards my beloved for that matter. In order to poetically use that feeling of great love of reverence and awe that is already part of the sonnet tradition and therefore, already available to me in it is poetic form.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:53)

“[T]o seek for new human emotions to express;
[because] in this search for novelty in the wrong place it
discovers the perverse”.

(“Tradition and Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot)

In fact, Eliot argues that it is an error in poetry, “To seek for new human emotions to express; because and as he justifies, in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse”.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:13)


Poetry is “not the expression of personality, but an escape
from personality”.

(“Tradition and Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot)

This explains why for Eliot poetry is and I quote, “not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”. Now, as you can see here this position is radically different from the romantic literary theory that was based on the cult of the poets personality. This is precisely the reason why we find Eliot attacking again and again the view of poetry as forwarded by romantics like Wordsworth for instance.

Indeed, this disappearance of the poet or even the author from critical consideration is to be among the chief identifying traits of a number of theories that emerge during the 20th century and we are in fact, going to look at some of these theories during the course of our next few lectures. But, right now let us move on to I. A. Richards and see how this denial of the personality of the put shapes his theoretical approach to literature.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:20)

<p>I. A. Richards (1893 - 1979)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Practical Criticism</i> (1929)	
<p>Source: WoldCat Identities</p>	

I. A. Richards was born in 1893 and died in 1979 and he is today most well known for an experiment that he conducted while teaching at the University of Cambridge and the principles of reading literature that he was able to build from that experiment and the experiment was basically very simple. Richards gave his class a number of poems and asked them to submit back to him their readings of those poems. So, they were supposed to write their interpretations of those poems and they were supposed to return back those interpretations to Richards anonymously.

But, there was something very interesting that Richards did and that was that the poems that he offered to his students were devoid of any references that might allow them to

connect these poems either to any particular author or to any particular historical social or cultural context. In fact, the poems that Richards provided his students did not even have their titles. And, Richards analyzed the interpretations and the readings that he received from his students in his seminal study titled *practical criticism* which was published in 1929.

And, in this study he observes how irrespective of whether the poem was actually produced by a great poet quote unquote great poet or by an obscure one, what the students mostly produced in the form of interpretation were stock responses which had little to do with the texts that the students actually encountered and this Richards argued was a widespread problem with literary criticism itself.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:30)

“We should be better advised to acknowledge frankly that, when people put poems in our hands [...] what we say, in nine cases out of ten, has nothing to do with the poem, but arises from politeness or spleen or some other social motive. [...] It would be an excellent thing if all the critical chitchat which we produce on these occasions were universally recognised to be what it is, social gesture [...]”.

(Practical Criticism, I. A. Richards)

So, in Richards own words and I quote, “We should be better advised to acknowledge frankly that, when people put poems in our hands what we say, in nine cases out of ten, has nothing to do with the point, but arises from politeness or spleen or some other social motive. It would be an excellent thing if all the critical chitchat which we produced on these occasions were universally recognized to be what it is, a social gesture”. In this experiment with the nameless and context less spoons we again come across a critique of the romantic theory, but this time it is a critique that is even more radical than the one provided by Eliot because whereas, Eliot stressed on the irrelevance of the personality of

the poet in creating and reading poetry Richards talks about the irrelevance both of the poet as well as the historical context of the poem.

Any commentary about these issues results in what Richards would in fact, consider to be banal chitchat and not literary criticism because what matters for Richards are just the words on the page and this intense concentration on the text forms the hallmark of the new kind of literary criticism that Richards initiated and which is known as practical criticism.

At the heart of this new kind of critical practice is a reading strategy. It is a reading strategy that is widely recognized as close reading, and in close reading we do not seek to understand the poet's personality through the poem nor do we seek to gain knowledge about the social political or cultural milieu which might have produced a poem. Rather a close reading focuses on things like the poem's structure, its use of rhyme the way in which it brings together a particular choice of words, a particular choice of metaphors or images, the way these metaphors images words interact with each other and create a sense of tension or create a sense of ambiguity.

Now, ambiguity is an interesting term and we will come to this later in our discussion today, but in other words in a close reading we basically focus only on those things that are before our eyes when we see a poem in the form of black words on a white page or a screen if you are reading your poem on a computer. So, according to Richards, the reason that we can subject to such an intense scrutiny, the internal structuring of the language of a poem a poem in particular and literature in general is because it employs a special kind of language which allows this scrutiny to happen. And, this language which Richards refers to as emotive language is different from the referential language of the more mundane and non literary forms of communication.

So, in case of the referential language it is used solely to refer us truly and reliably to the world outside language. So, if I say I need a pencil it is a referential language because I want you to be directed towards a pencil in the world outside language and to pick it up and give it to me on the other hand the language of poetry or literature can be studied and indeed should be studied according to the new critics by focusing not on its ability to refer the reader to an external reality, but by its ability to internally structure metaphors and symbols and figures of speeches to create a complex pattern of meaning.

This distinction between literary and non-literary language will also play an enormous role a very significant role in the literary theory identified as a Russian formalism which we are going to discuss in our next lecture. But, before we move on to Russian formalists let me briefly mention here at the end of my lecture today some of the work of the later new critics who carried forward the legacy of I. A. Richards and the first name that I want to mention here is that of William Empson.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:40)

<p>William Empson (1906-1984)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The Seven Types of Ambiguity</i> (1930)	
<p>Source: AZ Quotes</p>	

Empson who was student of a Richards presented in his book titled *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* which was published in 1930, the first sustained attempt to read literature following Richards principles of practical criticism which is to say by focusing exclusively on the language of literature and on the production of what he calls ambiguity through the employment of poetic devices.

Now, ambiguity is common enough term and it results from a multiplicity of meanings and it is usually considered as a negative thing within the domain of referential language where clarity is of the utmost value. So, for instance, if my message to you about the pencil is ambiguous, you will not know what to give me or what to do. But, in the literary language this ambiguity is something which is celebrated by new critics like Empson and this celebration of ambiguity is also something that is easily understood.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:15)

“... in eternal lines to Time thou
grow’st”

(“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day”,
Shakespeare)

If we consider an example like Shakespeare’s sonnet number 18 for instance, Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day, where the phrase and I quote from the poem, “in eternal lines to Time thou grow’st”, gives us the kind of pleasure that it does primarily because of the multiple possible interpretations of the word lines. Because, that word might mean the lines of progeny that the poet and his beloved might have if they unite together or even the lines of the poem itself as they grow and develop during the course of our reading.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:03)

Cleanth Brooks
(1906 - 1994)

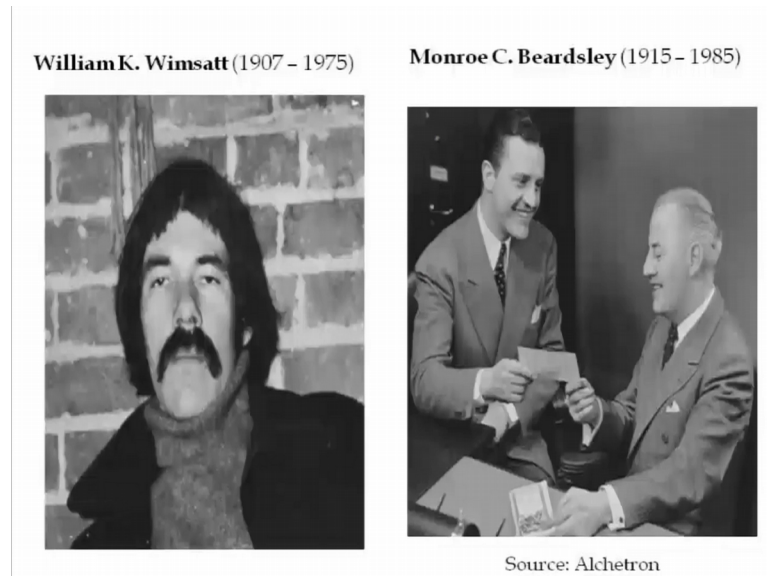
Warns us, from “the heresy
of paraphrase”



Source: WorldCat Identities

And, it is precisely because the pleasure of poetry rests in such linguistic ambiguity in such linguistic indecisiveness that we must shy away from what another new critics Cleanth Brooks warns us, which is the “heresy of paraphrase”. Since the way language is used in poetry and in literature in general is of utmost importance. It does not make any sense to create paraphrases of literary pieces because then the entire pleasure is lost.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:33)



The other critic whom I would like to refer before I end this lecture is the Yale University professor W. K. Wimsatt who along with his collaborator Monroe C. Beardsley produced two very influential essays in the 1940s.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:42)

- “The Intentional Fallacy”
- “The Affective Fallacy”

And, the first essay was titled The Intentional Fallacy and the second essay was titled The Affective Fallacy. In the first of these two essays Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that it is an interpretive error to read a literary work by trying to decipher the intentions which its authors wrote that piece. Not the least because the author is usually not available to the reader to testify what exactly his or her intention was.

The second essay makes a complimentary argument by highlighting the fallacy of reading a text based on the kind of emotional effects that it might give rise to in the readers. The claim here is that both in the case of intentional fallacy as also in the case of affective fallacy we are moving away from the real basis of literary criticism which is the literary text itself and what constitutes that literary text is neither the putative authorial intention nor the possible psychological effects that it may produce among its readers. It is constituted simply of the medium of language of words on the page.

So, as we can see with the new critics and during the first half of the 20th century literary criticism takes a definitive linguistic turn. In our upcoming lectures we are going to follow this linguistic turn in the 20th century literary criticism as it is manifested in various theoretical forms like formalism for instance or structuralism and post structuralism, but in the next lecture we will pick up formalism first.

Thank you for listening.